



I just stumbled onto your website. I would like to contribute a photograph commemorating my collaboration with my mentor Ed Emshwiller on the piece called Sunstone which we executed in 1979. There is no question about it, by the way, that Emsh was the principal artist, but he and I collaborated on this piece in a way which Emsh always acknowledged. You could say, simplistically, that he was the artist and I was the technologist supporting him, but that would not give an accurate picture of what happened in 1979 at NYIT = New York Institute of Technology.

Emsh showed up one day at “The Lab” at NYIT, as I predicted he would. I knew he was an artist who explored all the new media which came his way, from oils, to 16mm film, to video, to videodisks. And he lived on Long Island, where NYIT is located. It was just a matter of time, I told my colleagues, before he showed up. He did. He announced that he had a Guggenheim and wanted to make a 3-hour film using computer graphics during the next 6 months. We burst out laughing, which disconcerted him. On questioning us about the laughter, we told him he would be lucky to get 3 minutes done in that time. In fact, Sunstone, the piece made during that period with Emsh was slightly longer than 3 minutes, but not much, and it was “padded out” with some realtime digitized video.

I was enthusiastic about working with Emsh, and he and I formed a strong friendship and working collaborative style for the project. It worked liked this: Emsh would say I want to do this. For example, I want to push faces through a concrete wall. Then I would say, we can’t do that yet (this was the very early days of computer graphics and the machines were very slow and very expensive). ... But, if you changed your concept to this, then I could write a program to do it. For example, I suggested on the pushing a 3D face through the wall, that if he backed off to the appearance of a 3D face pushing through a wall, namely a 2D headon shot that simply looked like it should if actually done in 3D. He would then say typically, oh, OK, but in that case, can you do such and such? The process would go back and forth like that until I finally said “I can do that” and he was satisfied that it still fit his vision (which was a floating thing itself, changing as he learned what was possible and not). I felt like I was part of the image creation process, in addition to being the implementor.

It was a heady 6 months for me, and I was heavily influenced by my friendship with Emsh, and still am. He was enough older than me that he felt like a father of sorts. In fact, many people thought that was the relationship, since we both had long hair, his gray and mine dark (see the photo I want to submit). I would talk to Emsh about anything: love, life, women, sex, children, physics, art I once asked him what all this excitement about babies was. Whenever a friend had a baby, it was as if I lost him as a friend. Was it good idea to have babies? He replied, “It’ll break your heart, but it’s not to be missed.” So, ignoring the first part of that advice, I went off and had a baby, two in fact.

Artistically, Emsh taught me how to approach a new medium. Most people, when confronting our technology for the first time, went bananas about the total freedom of color expression. Emsh was overwhelmed by it and at first completely backed off from the color and used only grayscale. Then little by little he reintroduced color into Sunstone as he understood and thought he could control it.

The reason this collaboration worked so well is this I think: I am part artist and part technologist, with emphasis on the latter. I had painted in oils and acrylics and had a show once of my work. I wrote the paint program (the first in full color) for use by artists, including myself. Emsh was part technologist and part artist, with emphasis on the latter. His brother was a physicist. He could talk science and technology and enjoyed them. We met halfway mentally and hence artistically. I am still extremely proud of Sunstone, after all these years, and after having been involved in the creation of Pixar and lots of shorts and movies. In fact, it is still my favorite piece.

To be complete, there were two others at NYIT involved. Lance Williams designed the 3D floating tongue used in one shot. Garland Stern was responsible for helping Emsh put the colorized, digitized realtime video of a person (Emsh's son actually) leaving a video trail behind him, done digitally.

Sunstone was the last thing I did at NYIT. I left to form the computer graphics division at Lucasfilm, then Ed Catmull and I (Ed had been at NYIT too) cofounded Pixar as a spinoff from Lucasfilm.

Emsh's last advice he asked for of me was whether he should take the provost's job at Cal Arts (Disney established this school). I encouraged him to do so, and visited him there several times. I also attended his memorial service there after his death, one of the most affecting of my life. For I discovered there that Emsh had touched many many others with his warmth, humor, and generosity over the years.

The photo I want to contribute is one of the two of us working on Sunstone at NYIT in 1979. There is an image of a sun from Sunstone seemingly suspended in midair rather than on the surface of the monitor. This is easily explained: One exposure was made with the room light on to capture us and the working situation. A second (double) exposure was then made with the lights off to capture the screen. The camera was jostled slightly between exposures. We laughed mightily at this, and told one another that it captured amazingly well the "high" we felt while creating Sunstone.

For the photo, go to my website (url below). Click on Art. Scroll down to the Sunstone image (the third one down). The photo of the two of us is on the page you get if you click on that image.

Alvy (writing from Sydney just now)

PS. Videowise, I made my entry into the video scene of NYC with a video I made at Xerox PARC = Palo Alto Research Center using the brand spanking new technology called “raster graphics”. Of course that is how all computer graphics is now made. The piece was called Vidbits. Louise and Bill Etra saw it and introduced me around the scene--for example, seeing to it that I got it shown at the Video Kitchen, where I met Woody and Steina Vasulka, lifelong friends since then. They moved to New Mexico my homestate and I have visited them there (in Santa Fe) several times. Later I got an NEA grant for myself and my pal David DiFrancesco, a video artist out of San Francisco, who is still with Pixar. The grant was for exploitation of the new video art form, raster graphics. During that process I met and was befriended by Stan Vanderbeek, another fellow I miss a lot. He used to visit us at NYIT to play with the new medium and watch us run with it.

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